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Twenty Years in First Church:

AN

ANNIVERSARY SERMON

PREACHED IN

FIRST CHURCH, MAY 4, 1873.

BY

RUFUS ELLIS.

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ANNIVERSARY SERMON.

"Thus have I been twenty years in thy house." — GENESIS xxxi. 41.

IF you will turn to the catalogue of the ministers of this church, which covers the last page of the Hymn Book, you will find that your pastor was installed on the Fourth of May, 1853, and on Wednesday, which New England usage, now almost obsolete, set apart for celebrating the unions of minister and people. I have reached accordingly the Twentieth Anniversary of my Installation. I need not say that the years have brought many changes for us. Of those who represented the churches on that occasion, my honored predecessor,* so hearty in his welcome, so helpful in his

* Rev. N. Frothingham, D.D., died Monday, April 4, 1870, and was buried from the First Church on the following Wednesday. Dr. E. S. Gannett read the Scriptures, Dr. George E. Ellis offered prayer, and Dr. F. H. Hedge made the funeral address. The Pastor of the Church was detained at home by illness.

support of the new minister, the kind pastor of the New South, the church of my childhood, and my revered friend the minister of the church then in Federal, now in Arlington Street, have been gathered into the Father's House on high. Two who were my companions in our studies for this ministry have left our Broad Church for a Communion which is less open. Another is in charge of an independent society which declines to be enrolled in the year books as a church; and yet another, after long and faithful service, exercises his office only as a brother has need; whilst the minister of the Second Church in a city which is always a-building, has passed into and passed out of a new House of Worship in retaining his old position, and continuing his life-long work. Of fathers and mothers, heads of households that made up the congregation on my first Sunday, death has removed one-half. Less than one-half of my original fourscore and ten families will still be found amongst the worshippers. Largely it is a new congregation, though its continuity remains; and to any fresh and fruit-bearing branch upon our tree of life it might be said, were there any need to say it, "Thou bearest not the root, but the root thee." The places that knew us once as a religious society have been yielded to traffic. The story of the church in Chauncy Street has been told. The

dedication of this our Fifth House of Worship seems almost an event of the past, so entirely are we at home in this pleasant habitation, and so altogether at one, the last with the first and the first with the last, in a generosity which has shared every weight and made this almost a memorial building. Time would fail me to remind you how much all this means to your hearts and to mine, and what we have found this life of ours to be as we have lived it together, sometimes entering into the cloud, sometimes refreshed with a singular brightness. The record is upon our faces. That is enough for the light of this earthly day. The rest shall be the treasure laid up in the heart which lives forever. So amidst changes and chances, which God has made providences, the old life has been renewed, and more and more unfolded, and we may say, I trust without boasting, that for our church age means not decay and threatening dissolution, but an increase of power and of helpfulness. You will allow me to add that personally I have every reason for gratitude as I recall the experiences of the twenty years. There were those who, surveying the prospect for me, reported little that was encouraging in a congregation which had been for three years without a settled pastor, and in a neighborhood where homes were rapidly giving place to warehouses. But time has shown that

the reserved power of this church was greatly under-estimated, and if I could point to fidelities and successes of my own, answering in any degree to your kind offices in health and in sickness, the story of these years would leave little to be desired. That I still remain your debtor may be an added persuasive to work more earnestly whilst my day lasts.

The last sermon in the church in Chauncy Place was in part a retrospect of our experience as pastor and people in that House of Worship, and what was said at that time there is no need to repeat to-day, and much which has been builded into our being we can afford to lose sight of, if not to forget. The point from which we started and the things that we have been doing are always interesting, chiefly as they help to make plainer to us the need or the needlessness of a new departure, and yield encouragement for fresh enterprise. It is enough if our faces have been set as though we would go to Jerusalem, and in recalling what we have endeavored together I am most concerned to know whether our work shall abide, and is good for to-day and to-morrow and the day following. And it is very cheering to be able to find in our parochial life a true *principium* or principle; that is, something to begin from, a purpose which, consciously or unconsciously, has been steadily pursued, only deep-

ening and coming into clearer recognition as time goes on, still the same though demanding continually new expressions, and always inwardly and really consistent though sometimes taxed with inconsistencies by those who look only at the outward appearance. It is a blessed thing to be early in a faith which will serve you for a lifetime, so that your story will not be one of dislocations and wrenches and stress of weather because of the winds of doctrine, and perilous transplantings, and impotent halting between opposite opinions. We want to grow, and we want room to grow in, because to live is to grow, but so that the child shall be the father of the man, and the faith the same faith with all the knowledge that years shall bring to its illustration. Truth is one and catholic. Life may be the continuous unfolding of a fruitful germ. The new is ever bound up in the old, only waiting for that Love which in the fulness of the times makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall. Has it not been the experience of all the most earnest believers and workers that they have had new departures and new names thrust upon them against their will, whilst they insist that their purpose is not destruction but fulfilment, and that they are only stirring the earth about the roots of old truths, and seeking to make real and powerful what has already a name to live? Look down beneath the

surface, and you find rock foundations. What hinders to build upon these?

And yet in times which have been so fruitful as ours in ecclesiastical sensations and fluctuations, and what are called movements, it may be thought matter for reproach that the end of our twenty years finds minister and people ecclesiastically where we were in the beginning, professing no new theology, practising no new discipline, having passed through no revolutions, with no expectations of a church in the future which should be any other than this of the present day, save as it is enriched with larger measures of the same Spirit. But whether to our credit or not, this is your case and mine. Some of our dear friends and associates have become what are known as Free Religionists, some have cast in their lot with the Episcopalians, some have formally connected themselves with Trinitarian Congregationalism. Again and again I have stood at the parting of ways, and have been compelled to admit that what had been once a pleasant ecclesiastical relation must thenceforth be only a pleasant reminiscence. Here in First Church we sign the same old Covenant, — Christian, but broadly Christian; and as we take nothing from it, so we add nothing to it. We confess that Jesus is the Christ, Son of God and Son of man; that His Spirit guides into all truth, which is unto life; and

that Love is the one sign of discipleship. I should be ashamed to be obliged to admit that I have not been affected, sometimes very painfully, by all that has been going on in what is technically called the religious world; and yet as the years have passed I have been conscious of an ever-increasing confidence in the sufficiency of the simplest Christian Faith: that we do not want to add to it, but only to deepen and apply it, and that we are to try to separate what is essential in our religion from what is accidental, not to seek to believe many things, but rather to believe much. As on the one hand it becomes plainer that in the problem of religion there is a constant as well as a variable element, that the largest house must have its walls, that to grow as Christians is to grow into Christian persuasions, not out of them, and that the office of the Christian minister is to teach Christianity, not to criticise it, so, on the other hand, our simple Christian confession allows and encourages all true progress of body, mind, and spirit, placing us in sincere relations with all that is good and helpful in our age. "We thank Thee," said my predecessor in his prayer of Installation, "that there is a church for us, that there is an instituted Faith for us, not a school of speculation, and not a hall of debate, and not a chance assembly of those who have no fellowship with one another, and no common in-

heritance from the sacred past, but a Church of the Lord, resting upon the foundation of Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone, other than which no man can lay, and better than which no man can need, to build up the structures of a holy life, and a hope that reaches into the heavens. . . . We thank Thee for the Church that is Christ's body, still guarding and declaring his Word." Rich already in these privileges, we have not felt it necessary to take any ecclesiastical journeys to secure them. They were Christian privileges before Peter went to Rome, if ever he did go there, and before they began to say in Corinth, "I am of Paul, and I of Apollos." May I add that I have come to a clearer recognition of the wonderful simplicity which is in Christ; a better understanding that He is the Author and Finisher, not of Science but of Faith; that He lived and still lives in a Society which is older than any records of His words and works, however ancient and precious; that His Spirit alone guides into all Truth; and that even our Holy Scriptures were given rather to further than to foreclose our seeking for Divine Wisdom. Because so many have separated themselves altogether from the Christian Church, I do not propose to decline into an alarmist or heresy hunter, or to be one whit less broadly Christian than by all the traditions of this free church I am

pledged to be. I am proud to take a humble place with the "latitude men," who have never been wanting even in days when the Word of God seemed to be most bound. To believe in Christianity is to believe in freedom and progress. Our religion is given to us to be completed, but this completeness is not to be sought in metaphysics or in ritualism, but in prayer and pure living and all sweet humanities. It was given to us to be done and to be learned in the doing. All are to be welcomed to its labors and charities who are ready to confess allegiance to the Master. The scandal and the impotence of a divided Christendom are to be charged upon those who impose any test of discipleship beyond the simplest faith in the Son of God and the Saviour of men. I say these things not as judging others, those who magnify old things or those who propose new things, but as our answer to any who may be ready to charge that there is no life in us because we are not involved in the fluctuations and influenced by the fashions of our religious times.

But I am sometimes told, especially by those who have left our free Communion, that this may all be very well so far as our own day is concerned, and yet has no sure promise of a future. For this, it is said, you must have something more dogmatic and institutional. If it be so, then for those who would

be Christians there must be a Church of Authority, a Church of Rome; but let us rather say that Christianity lives on amongst men from generation to generation because it is the Life of God in our world, a Life in the common mind and heart and conscience, lives by virtue of what is divinely human, common to all sects and private to none. It lives because it is Daily Bread for the hungering soul, because it supplies the highest motives and the surest helps for all the good and profitable works of men; it is beyond all risk of decline wherever it is organized for common prayer, and common helpfulness, embodied and illustrated anew as the Word which shall never pass away yields the principle and suggests the spirit which should rule the hour. It will die out anywhere to all intents and purposes, no matter how carefully it may be formulated, when it simply goes over the theory of religion and morals in Sermons, or makes its formal confessions in Cathedrals or in Meeting Houses. As a mere preaching institution its fortunes will fluctuate, as God sends evangelists or man provides rhetoricians, and the wise bees or the foolish flies are gathered to the feast each after their kind. Let the new generation be occupied with the new work, making Christianity to Boston what Paul made it to Corinth, answering in deeds the still recurring questions, Are we Christians?

Is Christianity the dream of a Jewish peasant, or is it the salt of the earth? Has it been outgrown, or is it the pledge of new growth? Is it able to console men in adversity and to give them courage to fight against the evils of their lot? Is it a power in its way, as Science, Art, Culture in their ways? Still moving and handling these questions, there will be a place even for this still increasing number of fair and costly churches, and although those who frequent them may not be of one mind they will be more and more of one spirit. The vessels in their hands will be of various patterns, but they will all convey to the hungering and thirsting the bread and the water of the Divine Life. So much of Christianity as can be translated into experience and embodied in work, and that is the whole of Christianity, will live on, and Christians will come together in it, surely but slowly, — slowly, for it is curious to note how unprepared some men are to allow without compromise and to all a simplicity which they have accepted in their secret thought and affirmed in their best utterances, as when Peter, who had outlived Judaism, became a Jew again at Antioch, to Paul's great annoyance. No: if Protestantism has any future it must be in the keeping of a church which is truly broad because simply Christian, and which dares to set forth the Life of Christ, not only as a Model but as an Ex-

ample for men, a Life which seeks embodiment in human society, the kingdom on earth through which we are to pass into the kingdom above.*

I should be very unjust to many earnest workers and generous givers if I should fail to say that in these years this society has struck root deeper and reached forth more fruitful branches. We are growing, and in the right direction. We have tried, not without success, to have a religion which should be more than a private luxury; we have succeeded in having those with us through whom we can gain the blessing that comes with Christian service; we have continued to protest against all class churches as confessions of Christian failure; we are deeper in our purpose and more confirmed in our practice of Christian Hospitality, in the midst of the rivalries and jealousies of an increasingly luxurious community. This church and this chapel were built, these walls were made beautiful and these windows were painted, not exclusively for the use of those who have been at the charges of the undertaking. The cost of this ground and of these buildings, with all that they contain, was in round numbers $325,000. Of this sum $130,000 may be set down as practically, what a large part of it was

* "In Jesus Christ Episcopacy is nothing, and non-Episcopacy is nothing but the new creature." "I rejoice that we can look out of and above all Church systems to our dear Saviour."— *The late Dean Alford*, pp. 176, 178, of "Life, &c., by his Widow."

literally, a free gift, over and above some fifty thousand dollars which occupants have paid for their own pews. Regard has been had to the religious education which is given through the eyes to those who pass by on the other side as well as to those who enter the church, and it was designed from the first that mission work should be provided for within our own walls, and that a large part of this House should be equipped with the best, and forever exempted from the conditions of individual ownership or pecuniary assessment. There is room here for a genuine Christian Parish, and there is the spirit which alone can gather and bind such a Parish; and if any one says that there is no place here save for wealth, I can only answer that he judges according to the appearance, and not a righteous judgment. It was no part of the plan to fill up this House of Worship with only proprietors or lessees. It may be your turn some day to have a preacher who shall be able to attract an eager crowd of listeners, but the spirit of the congregation will preserve for the children of the Sunday School, and for their parents, and for any others who may choose to come, the portion of the Church which was originally arranged for their accommodation. This is now one of our traditions, and you will be sure to cherish it; and whilst yourselves you seek inspiration and guidance for your own individual occasions,

you will be working not at arm's length, but near at hand, to advance society and fashion this hard world according to the heavenly patterns.

As to methods and instrumentalities I can only say that each church must have its own, according to its peculiar condition and circumstances. I suppose that we fall much behind what is called "the Age" in social gatherings, and when I reflect upon our shortcomings in this way I can only comfort myself with the thought that many meetings which are held in our day in the vestries of Churches were as well, if not better, held somewhere else. I must confess to a little old-fashioned sympathy with that word of St. Paul, "And if any man hunger, let him eat at home." Still I do most earnestly wish that you would come together in our spacious chapel for Christian Work more freely than you do, the men as well as the women, uncommunicant as well as communicant members of the church, all of you who give liberally of money, and, as I am sure, are willing to give liberally of time, to our various enterprises, that we might awaken and cherish an earnest parish feeling. We want to come together as Christians, as those who are trying to be of one mind and one spirit in Christ, "in mutual love and confidence each to other," as our old covenant runs. And whenever we are together we want the heart which is the fountain of fine man-

ners and friendly speech, and which in the House of God counts none as strangers. It is a perpetual surprise how much can be done by a single passing word or look, whether to harmonize and bind or to alienate and scatter, whether to warm into confidence or to chill into distrust. Let me suggest the Pastor's House as a natural meeting place for the congregation.

When I came amongst you twenty years ago I was still climbing the hill of life, now I am on the descending slope. The guidance and companionship may be as welcome to those who descend with me, but not as certainly so to those who are still mounting. And yet I would fain believe that one may so keep mind and heart open, that he shall be as young with the young in the new thought and knowledge and conditions, as he is old with the old in the wisdom which can only come with years. When one has finished his eleven hundred and sixty-sixth sermon it might perhaps seem to be time to have done with writing sermons, and yet not, if the new books and the new meditations and the new age suggest fresh topics and fresh modes of treatment. Our religion is so rich and large that it is ever presented to us in new aspects, and every new day supplies fresh illustrations and calls for varying applications. Sometimes in a season of weariness the preacher is moved to say, "I have

given them all I have, and I shall never have any more," and sometimes, undoubtedly, the congregation is ready to echo the word; but where body, mind, and heart are healthy this can hardly be the case; rather should the power be cumulative, and the old, the vantage ground for the new, even in these days when so many roam from church to church, seeking rather for stimulants than for food, and Houses of Worship are needlessly multiplied. And yet let me add that, however this may be, the interests of a congregation should never be sacrificed in order that a preacher may be permitted to outstay his time. A graceful resignation becomes at length one of the duties of a pastor, to be met when the day arrives in gratitude for the past, and in glad recognition of the love which outlasts all outward relations; and by all means with promptness, for where the minister is always resigning yet never resigns, he himself is half decapitated, and his congregation entirely disheartened.

I have already detained you too long. It only remains for me to say that professing no novelties, and having discovered no panaceas, I shall try to do henceforth what I have been trying to do thus far, only seeking to do it better, and to bring the new out of the old. It has never been my fortune, and it never will be, to gather a congregation too large to be included in regular household ministra-

tions; to these, in conjunction with the preparation for the Sunday, I have always given, and shall still give, the time which is yours. A distinction is sometimes made between going about as a pastor and going about as a friend; it is a distinction without a difference, for one who goes about as a pastor, passing into the lights and shadows of human dwellings, can hardly fail to go about soon as a friend, to speak ever after as a friend, all the more earnestly, because in no formal way. And so to the joint duties of Preacher and Pastor I again address myself. The first days come back upon me, and for weeks to come I shall be continually visiting in thought many homes that were kindly opened to me in this city whilst I lingered during the summer months in my country parish, — homes now transplanted, scattered, dismantled, burned over, left to loneliness, the heads of the households and often the larger part of the members near to us still, but only in Him by whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named. Strengthened not weakened, cheered not saddened by memories of which even the swift years cannot rob us, I shall go forth to meet the Future, seeking as much as in me is to guide to wise and helpful issues this new life in these new places which God is giving to our dear, old church. To this church be loyal, be of one mind in maintaining the order of her courts,

watch lovingly over her interests, forsake not her assemblies, let your criticisms be the faithful wounds of a friend, and whatsoever ministries of the Christian Household are entrusted to my keeping shall be yours.

And to Him who gives the Word and sends forth the company of those that publish it be glory in the church of His Son forever!